The Second Elijah: Prophetic Fulfillment and Eschatological Expectations

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The figure of Elijah, a prophet from the Old Testament known for his zealous defense of God's truth, holds a key place in both Jewish and Christian eschatology. His prophesied return is rooted in Malachi 4:5-6, where Elijah is foretold to come before the "great and dreadful day of the Lord." In Christian theology, Elijah's role is seen through the lens of dual fulfillment: first, in the person of John the Baptist, who came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" to prepare the way for Jesus' first coming, and second, as a prophetic figure who may return before the Second Coming of Christ to restore all things. This paper explores the prophetic significance of Elijah's return, its role in eschatological frameworks, and its implications for Christ's final judgment. By examining both past and future dimensions of this prophecy, we aim to understand how Elijah's return shapes Christian expectations of the end times and the ultimate realization of God's Kingdom.

Keywords: Elijah, John the Baptist, Malachi prophecy, Second Coming, eschatology, dual fulfillment, end times, Christian theology, restoration, final judgment.

I. Introduction

The return of the prophet Elijah holds a significant place in both Jewish and Christian eschatological frameworks. Within the scope of prophetic literature, Elijah is portrayed as a precursor to major divine interventions, particularly as one who will return before the “great and dreadful day of the Lord,” as stated in **Malachi 4:5-6 (NIV)**: *"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes."* This prophecy has led to centuries of theological discussion about Elijah’s role in the unfolding of God’s redemptive plan, both for the people of Israel and for the world.

In Jewish tradition, Elijah is expected to return to herald the arrival of the Messiah, a hope maintained during Passover celebrations, where a cup of wine is set aside for Elijah, symbolizing his anticipated return. For Christians, this prophecy takes on a deeper dimension, as Jesus Christ, during His ministry, linked the appearance of Elijah to significant messianic events, including His own ministry and future return. This connection brings forth a complex theological question: Did John the Baptist fulfill this prophecy, or should believers still expect the literal return of Elijah before the Second Coming of Christ?

Dual Fulfillment Debate

The debate over whether the prophecy of Elijah’s return has been fulfilled or is yet to be completed centers around the words of Jesus and the role of John the Baptist. In the Gospels, Jesus identifies John the Baptist as the "Elijah who was to come," thus implying that the spirit and power of Elijah were present in John's ministry to prepare the way for Christ's first coming. This fulfillment is evident in verses such as **Matthew 11:14 (NIV)**: *"And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come."* Moreover, the angel’s message to Zechariah regarding his son, John the Baptist, underscores this connection: **Luke 1:17 (NIV)** states, *"And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children."*

However, despite this clear identification, Jesus also makes another statement in **Matthew 17:11 (NIV)**: *"To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things."* This has led some theologians to conclude that the prophecy was only partially fulfilled through John the Baptist. In this view, John’s ministry prefigured a future, more literal return of Elijah before the Second Coming of Christ. This interpretation

finds support in the eschatological nature of Malachi's prophecy, which many believe is yet to be fully realized in the future "great and dreadful day" when Christ returns to judge the world.

Thus, a dual fulfillment view has emerged within Christian theology, where John the Baptist is understood to have fulfilled the role of Elijah at Christ's first coming, but a future appearance of Elijah (or a prophetic figure in his likeness) will precede Christ's return. This ongoing expectation has led to a variety of interpretations, some of which look to **Revelation 11**, where Elijah is speculated to be one of the two witnesses who will testify before the end times.

This paper seeks to explore these interpretations and the significance of Elijah's role as a precursor to both the first and second comings of Christ, offering a deeper understanding of the dual fulfillment debate and its implications for Christian eschatology.

II. Prophetic Background in the Old Testament

The Book of Malachi, written around the 5th century BCE, is the last book of the Old Testament, serving as both a conclusion to the prophetic tradition of Israel and a bridge to the New Testament's messianic hope. In this final prophetic message, Malachi offers a sobering warning about a coming day of judgment but also a promise of hope for the faithful. One of the key elements of this promise is the prophecy of Elijah's return, which is found in **Malachi 4:5-6 (NIV)**:

"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."

This prophecy is significant for its positioning of Elijah as a harbinger of divine judgment and restoration, marking Elijah as a pivotal figure in the unfolding of God's ultimate plan for humanity.

Historical and Prophetic Context of Malachi

Malachi prophesied during a period of spiritual decline in Israel following the return from Babylonian exile. The people had rebuilt the Temple, but their

enthusiasm for worship had waned. Corruption among the priests, social injustices, and widespread disillusionment had set in, and the people questioned whether God would fulfill His promises to them. Against this backdrop, Malachi calls the people to repentance, warning of a coming day when God would purify His people and bring judgment against the wicked.

The prophecy concerning Elijah is introduced at the conclusion of Malachi's oracle. The "great and dreadful day of the Lord" referenced in **Malachi 4:5** is traditionally understood as a day of ultimate divine intervention—a day of judgment for the wicked but also of salvation and renewal for the righteous. In this context, Elijah is depicted as a forerunner who will come to prepare the people for this critical day, ensuring that they are ready for the Lord's arrival.

The Significance of Elijah in Israel's History

Elijah is one of the most significant prophetic figures in Israel's history, known for his dramatic confrontations with Israel's apostasy and his role in calling the nation back to God. His ministry occurred during the reign of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, a period marked by the widespread worship of the Canaanite god Baal. Elijah's role as a prophet was to stand against this idolatry and to reaffirm the covenant between Yahweh and Israel.

One of the most notable events in Elijah's life is his confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), where God's power was displayed in a miraculous fire that consumed the offering Elijah had prepared, while the prophets of Baal failed. This event solidified Elijah's reputation as a defender of true worship and one empowered by God to bring Israel back to faithfulness.

Elijah's life ended in a unique manner, as he did not die but was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, as described in **2 Kings 2:11 (NIV)**:

"As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind."

Because Elijah did not experience physical death, the Jewish tradition developed a belief that Elijah would return before the Messiah's coming. This expectation grew into a hope that Elijah would come as a precursor to the great and final intervention of God in history. Elijah, therefore, came to symbolize the

restoration of faithfulness and the turning back of the people to their covenant relationship with God.

Elijah as a Precursor to Major Divine Interventions

In **Malachi 4:5-6**, Elijah is presented as more than a historical prophet—he is portrayed as a future eschatological figure whose role is to prepare the people for the Lord's final intervention. His task is described as "turning the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents," which can be interpreted both literally and figuratively. In the literal sense, it speaks to the restoration of familial relationships and societal unity. In the figurative sense, it represents a return to the faithfulness of the patriarchs and a renewal of the covenant between God and His people.

Elijah's return, therefore, is seen as a necessary step before the "great and dreadful day of the Lord." His mission is to lead the people to repentance, reconciliation, and spiritual renewal so that they are prepared to face God's judgment and to receive His ultimate blessing. In this sense, Elijah's role in the prophetic tradition is not merely a historical reflection but also a forward-looking anticipation of a divine messenger who will bridge the gap between humanity's sinful condition and God's redemptive plan.

Summary of Elijah's Role in Prophecy

Elijah's positioning in Malachi's prophecy serves two primary functions:

1. **As a Herald of Judgment**: Elijah's return signals that the "great and dreadful day of the Lord" is imminent, and that judgment will soon follow. His presence is a warning to the people to repent and turn back to God before it is too late.
2. **As a Messenger of Restoration**: Elijah's task is not merely to announce judgment but to facilitate the reconciliation of relationships—both among individuals and between the people and God. He is portrayed as the agent of spiritual renewal, preparing the hearts of the people for the coming of the Lord.

Thus, Elijah's return is not simply an event of historical interest but a key element in the eschatological hope of both the Jewish and Christian traditions. His role as a

precursor to divine intervention makes him central to understanding the unfolding of God's redemptive plan, both in the first and second comings of Christ, as we will explore in the subsequent sections.

III. John the Baptist as Elijah (First Fulfillment)

The role of John the Baptist as the fulfillment of the prophecy regarding the return of Elijah is a key theme in the New Testament. Jesus Himself identifies John as the "Elijah who was to come," emphasizing that John's ministry symbolically fulfills the prophetic role of Elijah in preparing the way for the Lord. However, this fulfillment is often understood as spiritual and symbolic, as John the Baptist came in the "spirit and power of Elijah," rather than being a literal reincarnation of the Old Testament prophet.

Jesus' Identification of John the Baptist as Elijah

In **Matthew 11:14 (NIV)**, Jesus makes a definitive statement about John the Baptist's role in relation to the prophecy from **Malachi 4:5-6**:

"And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come."

This statement is significant because it confirms that John the Baptist fulfills the role of Elijah in the context of Jesus' first coming. Jesus offers this identification as a revelation for those who are "willing to accept it," implying that it requires spiritual discernment to see how John embodies Elijah's prophetic mission. Jesus also implies that John's role as Elijah is not immediately obvious or literal; instead, it must be understood symbolically and in light of the mission John came to accomplish.

John's Ministry as the Fulfillment of Elijah's Role

The Gospel of Luke provides further insight into the connection between John the Baptist and Elijah, particularly in the message delivered to Zechariah, John's father, by the angel Gabriel. In **Luke 1:17 (NIV)**, the angel speaks of John's future ministry:

"And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

This verse directly echoes the prophecy in **Malachi 4:5-6**, where Elijah is said to "turn the hearts of the parents to their children." The angel's message indicates that John's ministry would fulfill the essential elements of Elijah's mission by calling people to repentance and preparing them for the coming of the Messiah. However, the language used—"in the spirit and power of Elijah"—makes it clear that John is not a literal reincarnation of Elijah but rather a figure who continues Elijah's prophetic work. His ministry carries the same spirit of fervor, confrontation of sin, and call to repentance that characterized Elijah's mission in the Old Testament.

The Symbolic and Spiritual Fulfillment of Elijah's Return

John the Baptist's role as the forerunner to Christ is a spiritual and symbolic fulfillment of the prophecy concerning Elijah. Just as Elijah confronted the idolatry and apostasy of Israel and called the people to return to Yahweh, so too did John the Baptist confront the moral and spiritual decay of his time, calling people to repentance and preparing the way for the coming of Jesus.

1. **Preaching Repentance**: John's message was one of repentance and spiritual renewal, much like Elijah's. In **Matthew 3:1-2 (NIV)**, John is introduced as preaching, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."* This echoes Elijah's mission to turn the people of Israel back to God during a time of rampant idolatry and moral corruption under King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Similarly, John's message called the people of Israel to spiritual renewal in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.
2. **Confronting Sin and Hypocrisy**: Like Elijah, who boldly confronted the sins of the leaders of Israel, John the Baptist did not hesitate to challenge the religious and political authorities of his day. He rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees, calling them a "brood of vipers" in **Matthew 3:7-8 (NIV)**:

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

This fearless proclamation of truth, even at personal risk, mirrors Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal and his opposition to King Ahab. John, like Elijah, acted as a reformer, warning the people and their leaders of impending divine judgment.

3. **Preparing the Way for the Lord**: John's primary mission, like that of Elijah, was to prepare the people for a divine encounter. In John's case, this was the arrival of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. **Mark 1:2-3 (NIV)** describes John as fulfilling the prophecy from Isaiah 40:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way—a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

This preparation involved not only calling people to repentance but also helping them recognize their need for a savior. John's baptism in the Jordan River was a symbolic act of cleansing, a way for the people to prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord. This aligns with Elijah's role in the Old Testament, where he turned the people back to Yahweh in preparation for divine judgment and intervention.

The Significance of John as Elijah in the First Coming

John the Baptist's identification as the "Elijah who was to come" is essential to understanding the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in the life and ministry of Jesus. John's role as Elijah indicates that the prophecy from **Malachi 4:5-6** was not merely about a literal return of the historical figure of Elijah but about the continuation of Elijah's prophetic mission in preparing the people for God's intervention in history.

The fact that Jesus Himself identified John as Elijah confirms that John's ministry was part of God's plan to fulfill this prophecy in a spiritual and symbolic way. However, as noted in **Matthew 11:14 (NIV)**, Jesus adds, *"if you are willing to accept it."* This statement implies that the fulfillment of Elijah's prophecy through John was not universally recognized or accepted at the time. Many expected a literal return of Elijah, and John's symbolic role may have been a source of confusion for some.

Partial or Complete Fulfillment?

While John the Baptist fulfills the role of Elijah in the context of Jesus' first coming, the question remains whether this is a complete or partial fulfillment of the prophecy in **Malachi 4:5-6**. Jesus' statement in **Matthew 17:11 (NIV)**—*"Elijah comes and will restore all things"*—has led some theologians to argue that a future, literal return of Elijah may still occur before the Second Coming of Christ.

In this view, John the Baptist fulfilled the role of Elijah in preparing the way for Jesus' first coming, but the prophecy may have a dual fulfillment, with Elijah or an Elijah-like figure returning before the final "great and dreadful day of the Lord." This interpretation holds that the restoration and reconciliation promised in **Malachi 4:5-6** were only partially fulfilled in John's ministry and will be completed before Christ's return.

Conclusion

John the Baptist's role as the "Elijah who was to come" demonstrates how Old Testament prophecies are often fulfilled in ways that go beyond literal expectations. Through his ministry, John embodied the spirit and power of Elijah, preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah and calling them to repentance. Jesus' identification of John as Elijah affirms that the prophecy was fulfilled in a symbolic and spiritual sense during Jesus' first coming. However, the anticipation of a future fulfillment remains a subject of theological discussion, with the possibility that Elijah may return again before the Second Coming of Christ to complete the work of restoration and reconciliation.

IV. The Expectation of a Future Elijah (Second Fulfillment)

The anticipation of Elijah's return continues to play a significant role in Christian eschatology. While Jesus identified John the Baptist as the Elijah who was to come in the context of His first coming, there are indications in the New Testament that a future return of Elijah may still be expected before the Second Coming of Christ. This expectation is particularly drawn from **Matthew 17:10-13 (NIV)**, where Jesus discusses Elijah's role in the restoration of all things:

"The disciples asked him, 'Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?' Jesus replied, 'To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way, the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.' Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist."

In this passage, Jesus affirms that Elijah must come and restore all things, but He also emphasizes that Elijah has already come in the person of John the Baptist, though he was not recognized for who he truly was. This statement has led many to believe in a **dual fulfillment** of the prophecy: John the Baptist fulfilled the Elijah prophecy for Christ's first coming, and another, more literal fulfillment may still occur before Christ's return.

Eschatological Implications of Jesus' Words

Jesus' statement in **Matthew 17:11**—*"To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things"*—has significant eschatological implications. The phrase "restore all things" suggests that Elijah's role is not limited to preparing for Christ's first coming but has a broader mission related to the restoration of order, justice, and spiritual renewal before the final culmination of history. The restoration here could be understood as the reconciliation of people to God, the unification of the faithful, and the defeat of evil forces in preparation for the establishment of God's Kingdom.

Many theologians believe that this restoration is yet to be fully accomplished and will only occur at the end of time, when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead. In this view, Elijah's return will precede this final event, aligning with the prophecy from **Malachi 4:5-6 (NIV)**:

"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes."

The "great and dreadful day of the Lord" is often interpreted as the end times, or the Day of Judgment, which suggests that Elijah's future role will be connected to this period of eschatological fulfillment. Therefore, many believe that the return of Elijah is still anticipated, as his coming is necessary to prepare humanity for the "great and dreadful day," which many equate with the Second Coming of Christ.

The Anticipation of Elijah's Return Before the Second Coming

The belief that Elijah will return before the Second Coming of Christ is rooted in both Old and New Testament prophecies. While John the Baptist is seen as the fulfillment of Elijah's role in preparing the way for Jesus' first coming, the expectation of a more literal return remains strong in Christian eschatology. This view is particularly held by those who interpret the "great and dreadful day of the Lord" as a future event that is tied to Christ's return.

Elijah's return is seen as necessary to fulfill the full scope of his prophetic mission, which includes the restoration of all things. This mission, according to **Matthew 17:11**, has not yet been completed, as Jesus' statement implies an ongoing and future aspect of Elijah's role. Some scholars argue that the partial fulfillment of Elijah's return through John the Baptist during Christ's first coming serves as a foreshadowing of a more complete fulfillment before the Second Coming.

In particular, the **two witnesses** mentioned in **Revelation 11** are often associated with this future fulfillment. While the identity of these two witnesses is not explicitly given, many theologians believe that one of them could be Elijah, returning to complete the mission of restoration before the final judgment. The two witnesses are described as having miraculous powers, including the ability to shut up the sky to prevent rain, a characteristic that echoes Elijah's miracle in **1 Kings 17:1**.

Theological Interpretations Across Christian Traditions

Various Christian theological traditions approach the expectation of Elijah's future return differently, depending on their eschatological frameworks. The three main perspectives—**pre-millennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism**—offer distinct interpretations of how Elijah's return fits into the timeline of the Second Coming and the end times.

1. **Pre-millennialism**: Pre-millennialists believe that Christ will return to establish a literal 1,000-year reign on earth, known as the millennium, before the final judgment. In this view, Elijah's return is often placed within the context of the tribulation period that precedes Christ's millennial reign. Many pre-millennialists believe that Elijah will appear as one of the two witnesses in **Revelation 11**, testifying during the tribulation and helping to

restore Israel to faith in Christ. His return is seen as a key event in preparing the world for the Second Coming, after which the millennial kingdom will be established.

2. **Amillennialism**: Amillennialists interpret the 1,000-year reign of Christ as symbolic rather than literal, believing that the millennium represents the current church age, in which Christ reigns spiritually through His church. In this view, Elijah's return is sometimes seen as a more spiritual or symbolic event, similar to the role that John the Baptist played in preparing the way for Christ's first coming. Some amillennialists argue that the prophecy of Elijah's return was fully fulfilled in John the Baptist, while others suggest that Elijah's future role will be part of the final judgment when Christ returns.
3. **Postmillennialism**: Postmillennialists believe that Christ will return after the millennium, which they view as a golden age of Christian dominance and peace on earth, brought about by the spread of the gospel. In this framework, Elijah's return is often seen as contributing to the final evangelization and restoration of humanity before the Second Coming. His role is considered part of the broader mission of spiritual renewal that will lead to a worldwide Christian revival before Christ's return.

Conclusion: The Dual Fulfillment of Elijah's Return

The expectation of Elijah's return before the Second Coming of Christ is a deeply rooted concept in Christian eschatology. While John the Baptist fulfilled the role of Elijah during Christ's first coming, there remains an anticipation that Elijah—or a figure like him—will return in the future to "restore all things" before the final judgment. This belief is based on Jesus' words in **Matthew 17:11** and the prophecy from **Malachi 4:5-6**, both of which point to Elijah's role in preparing humanity for the "great and dreadful day of the Lord."

Different theological traditions interpret the timing and nature of Elijah's return in varying ways, but the common thread is the expectation that Elijah's mission of restoration has yet to be fully realized. Whether Elijah returns as one of the two witnesses in **Revelation 11** or as a separate prophetic figure, his role remains integral to the unfolding of God's redemptive plan and the culmination of history at the Second Coming of Christ.

In summary, the dual fulfillment of Elijah's return is seen in the initial fulfillment through John the Baptist and the anticipated future fulfillment before Christ's return, marking Elijah as a key figure in both the first and second comings of the Messiah.

V. Elijah's Role in the End Times: Dual Fulfillment

The idea of Elijah's return playing a key role in both the first and second comings of Christ is a well-established theme in Christian eschatology. The concept of **dual fulfillment** posits that prophecy can be fulfilled in multiple stages or through different historical events. In the case of Elijah, dual fulfillment suggests that his prophetic role was first realized through the ministry of John the Baptist, but a more literal or future appearance of Elijah may still be expected before the Second Coming of Christ.

The Argument for Dual Fulfillment

The dual fulfillment of Elijah's prophecy begins with John the Baptist's role as the forerunner to Jesus' first coming. John was identified by Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecy in **Malachi 4:5-6 (NIV)**:

"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes."

John's mission was to prepare the way for Christ's ministry by calling people to repentance and baptizing them as a symbolic cleansing in preparation for the coming Messiah. This fulfillment is affirmed by Jesus in **Matthew 11:14 (NIV)**:

"And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come."

However, Jesus also makes an important statement in **Matthew 17:11 (NIV)**:

"To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things."

This statement has led many theologians to argue that while John the Baptist fulfilled Elijah's role in the context of Christ's first coming, there remains a future fulfillment of the prophecy in which Elijah, or a figure like him, will return before Christ's second coming to "restore all things." The idea that John the Baptist is a

partial or symbolic fulfillment of the Elijah prophecy opens the door to the expectation of a **literal fulfillment** in the future.

John the Baptist as the First Fulfillment

As previously discussed, John the Baptist's ministry mirrored that of Elijah in several key ways, particularly in his call for repentance and his confrontation of the spiritual corruption of his time. John's role as the forerunner to Jesus' first coming was to prepare the hearts of the people and to make them ready to receive the Messiah.

John is described in **Luke 1:17 (NIV)** as coming in the "spirit and power of Elijah," suggesting that his mission was to continue Elijah's prophetic work. However, the phrasing in this verse—"spirit and power"—implies that John was not literally Elijah but fulfilled the **spiritual essence** of Elijah's mission. Thus, John's role is viewed as a **partial fulfillment**, with the possibility that the prophecy will have a second, more literal realization in the future.

The Expectation of a Future Elijah Before the Second Coming

Many theologians believe that the prophecy in **Malachi 4:5-6** has not yet been fully realized and that Elijah's future appearance will precede the Second Coming of Christ. This belief is based on the notion that the "great and dreadful day of the Lord" refers to the **final judgment** at the end of time, when Christ will return to establish His kingdom and judge the living and the dead.

In this interpretation, Elijah's return will be necessary to restore order, call the people to repentance, and prepare the world for Christ's return. The future Elijah is expected to complete the work of restoration that began with John the Baptist but has not yet been fully accomplished.

The expectation of Elijah's future return is closely linked to the events described in the Book of Revelation, particularly the prophecy of the **two witnesses** in **Revelation 11**.

Revelation 11: The Two Witnesses

In **Revelation 11:3-6 (NIV)**, two witnesses are described who will prophesy for 1,260 days during the end times:

"And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth. They are 'the two olive trees' and the two lampstands, and 'they stand before the Lord of the earth.' If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. They have power to shut up the heavens so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want."

The identity of these two witnesses has been the subject of much debate, but many scholars and theologians believe that one of them could be **Elijah**, returning to fulfill the final prophetic role as described in **Malachi 4:5-6**. There are several reasons why Elijah is considered a prime candidate for one of the witnesses:

1. **The Power to Shut the Heavens**: The two witnesses are described as having the power to "shut up the heavens so that it will not rain," which is a direct reference to Elijah's miracle in **1 Kings 17:1 (NIV)**, where he prophesied a drought as a judgment from God:

"Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.'"

This connection suggests that Elijah's future role may involve similar miraculous acts of judgment, reinforcing the idea that he could be one of the two witnesses.

2. **Elijah's Eschatological Role**: The prophecy in **Malachi 4:5-6** links Elijah's return to the "great and dreadful day of the Lord," which is often interpreted as the end times. The two witnesses in **Revelation 11** are active during a period of great tribulation and judgment, aligning with the role that Elijah is expected to play before Christ's return.

3. **Elijah's Unique Departure**: Elijah's departure from the earth was unique in that he did not experience death but was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, as described in **2 Kings 2:11 (NIV)**:

"As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind."

Because Elijah did not die, it has long been believed that he is destined to return to fulfill his prophetic mission. This expectation aligns with the two witnesses' ability to prophesy and perform miracles before being killed and then resurrected, as described later in **Revelation 11**.

Elijah and the Two Witnesses: A Literal Return?

The possibility that Elijah is one of the two witnesses in **Revelation 11** is supported by the similarities between the miracles attributed to the witnesses and the miracles performed by Elijah in the Old Testament. However, the identity of the second witness is less clear. Some theologians suggest that the second witness could be **Moses**, as the two witnesses also have the power to "turn the waters into blood," a reference to one of the plagues Moses called down upon Egypt (Exodus 7:20). The pairing of Elijah and Moses is significant because both appeared with Jesus during the **Transfiguration** in **Matthew 17:1-3**, representing the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah).

Other interpretations propose that the second witness could be **Enoch**, another figure in the Bible who did not experience death but was taken up to heaven (Genesis 5:24). Like Elijah, Enoch's unique departure has led some to believe that he will return in the end times to fulfill a prophetic role.

Regardless of the identity of the second witness, the role of Elijah in the end times is seen as central to the final events of God's redemptive plan. His return is expected to bring about the restoration of all things, leading to the final judgment and the establishment of God's Kingdom.

Conclusion: Elijah's Dual Role in the First and Second Comings

The concept of **dual fulfillment** offers a compelling explanation for Elijah's role in both the first and second comings of Christ. Through John the Baptist, Elijah's

prophetic mission was partially fulfilled as he prepared the way for Jesus' first coming. However, the expectation of a **future fulfillment** remains, particularly in the context of Elijah's return before the Second Coming to "restore all things."

The **two witnesses** in **Revelation 11** provide a strong case for Elijah's literal return during the end times, with many scholars believing that he will be one of these two figures who testify and perform miracles during a period of great tribulation. Elijah's role in the end times is tied to both judgment and restoration, as he prepares the world for the return of Christ and the final establishment of God's Kingdom.

In this dual role, Elijah serves as both the herald of Christ's first advent and a key figure in the final events leading to His second coming, fulfilling his prophetic mission across the entirety of God's redemptive timeline.

VI. Theological Implications of Elijah's Return

The return of Elijah holds profound theological significance within Christian eschatology. Elijah's prophesied reappearance is not just a symbol of continuity between the Old and New Testaments; it represents a critical moment in the unfolding of God's redemptive plan for humanity. His return is seen as a precursor to key end-time events, including the Second Coming of Christ, the final judgment, and the ultimate restoration of God's Kingdom. By understanding Elijah's role in this eschatological framework, we can appreciate the deep connections between prophecy, divine justice, and the promise of future redemption.

The Significance of Elijah in Eschatological Frameworks

Elijah's return is a pivotal event in many Christian eschatological frameworks, particularly in light of the prophecy from **Malachi 4:5-6 (NIV)**:

"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."

This passage emphasizes Elijah's return as both a warning and a preparatory act for the coming of the "great and dreadful day of the Lord." In Christian eschatology, this "day of the Lord" is often interpreted as the Second Coming of Christ, when He will return in glory to judge the living and the dead. Elijah's return is therefore integral to the unfolding of these events, as he is seen as the one who will restore spiritual order and call people to repentance before this final divine intervention.

In various Christian traditions, Elijah's return is tied to several key themes in eschatological thought:

1. **Repentance and Restoration**: Elijah's mission, as described in Malachi and echoed in the Gospels, is to "turn the hearts" of people, leading them back to God. This act of repentance and spiritual restoration is critical in preparing humanity for Christ's return. Theologically, this points to the idea that before Christ returns to judge the world, there will be a period of widespread repentance, initiated by Elijah's prophetic ministry. His role in restoring hearts can also be understood as a symbol of reconciliation—not only between God and humanity but also within families and communities, healing divisions that result from sin.
2. **Judgment and Divine Justice**: The prophecy of Elijah's return is closely linked to the themes of judgment and divine justice. In **Malachi 4:6 (NIV)**, the warning is clear: if the people do not respond to Elijah's call for repentance, God will "strike the land with total destruction." This impending judgment highlights the urgency of Elijah's role in preparing the way for Christ's return. In Christian eschatology, the return of Elijah is seen as a final opportunity for people to repent before facing the ultimate judgment. Elijah's presence signals that the time of mercy is coming to an end, and the righteous justice of God will soon be executed. Thus, Elijah's return serves as a dividing line between those who accept the call to repentance and those who persist in rebellion.
3. **The Herald of the Messiah**: Just as John the Baptist fulfilled the role of Elijah as the herald of Christ's first coming, Elijah's expected return in the end times is viewed as heralding Christ's second coming. His appearance would serve as a clear sign that the final events of history are about to

unfold, providing a last opportunity for people to turn to God before the "day of the Lord" arrives. Elijah's role as a forerunner is thus deeply connected to Christ's messianic mission, as he prepares the way for the return of the King. This concept reinforces the continuity between the Old Testament prophetic tradition and the New Testament's focus on Christ's second advent.

Elijah's Return and the Broader Understanding of the Second Coming

The return of Elijah is more than just a prophetic event—it is deeply tied to the broader theological understanding of the Second Coming and the final judgment. Theologically, Elijah's role highlights several important aspects of Christ's return and the culmination of human history:

1. **The Role of Prophecy in Divine Plan**: Elijah's return emphasizes the continuity of God's redemptive plan throughout history. From the time of the Old Testament prophets to the New Testament church, God's plan for humanity has involved calling His people back to Him through messengers, prophets, and ultimately His Son, Jesus Christ. Elijah's reappearance in the end times is a fulfillment of God's promise to intervene decisively in human history. His return ties the entire biblical narrative together, reminding us that God's purposes are consistent and unfold according to His divine timetable. Elijah's role as a prophet from the past who appears in the future underscores the timelessness of God's actions in history.
2. **Preparing for Christ's Reign**: Elijah's return is linked to the eschatological expectation that Christ will return not only to judge but also to establish His eternal reign. Elijah's work of restoration—turning hearts, healing divisions, and calling for repentance—is seen as a preparation for the Kingdom of God that will be fully realized when Christ returns. Theologically, this points to the idea that the coming of the Kingdom is not just about judgment but also about renewal and the fulfillment of God's promises to His people. Elijah's role is therefore preparatory, ensuring that the people are ready for the reign of Christ that will follow His return.
3. **Christ as Judge and King**: Elijah's return also ties into the broader understanding of Christ's role as both Judge and King in the end times. In Christian eschatology, Christ's return involves both the execution of divine

justice and the establishment of His eternal Kingdom. Elijah's presence signals the coming judgment, as he is tasked with warning the people and calling them to repentance. However, it also points to the future reign of Christ, as Elijah's work of restoration prepares the way for Christ to reign in righteousness. Theologically, this reinforces the dual aspect of Christ's Second Coming—He comes not only to judge but also to restore, heal, and establish His eternal dominion.

4. **God's Final Word on Justice and Mercy**: Elijah's return highlights the tension between God's justice and mercy, a theme that runs throughout Christian eschatology. On one hand, Elijah's return is a final act of divine mercy—he comes to warn the people, giving them one last opportunity to repent before the final judgment. On the other hand, his return also marks the impending judgment, as the "great and dreadful day of the Lord" will soon follow. This balance between mercy and justice is central to the Christian understanding of the end times. Elijah's role emphasizes that God's justice is not arbitrary but is preceded by ample opportunities for repentance and redemption. Yet, for those who reject the call to repent, God's judgment will be final and complete.

Elijah and the Final Restoration

In addition to being a harbinger of judgment, Elijah's return is also connected to the idea of **final restoration**. The phrase "restore all things," as used in **Matthew 17:11 (NIV)**—*"Elijah comes and will restore all things"*—speaks to a theological understanding that, before the end, God will restore His people and His creation to a state of righteousness and order. This restoration includes the healing of relationships, both between people and with God, and the restoration of justice and peace that was broken by sin.

In some theological interpretations, Elijah's role in the restoration process mirrors the work of the Messiah, whose reign will bring about the final reconciliation of all things. Elijah's mission to "turn the hearts of parents to their children" is emblematic of the broader work of healing and restoration that Christ will complete upon His return. This highlights Elijah's role as not only a prophet of warning but also a **prophet of hope**, preparing the way for the full realization of God's Kingdom.

Conclusion

The return of Elijah holds significant theological implications for the understanding of the Second Coming and the final judgment. His role in eschatology is deeply tied to the themes of repentance, divine justice, and restoration. Elijah's return, whether understood symbolically or literally, serves as a key moment in the unfolding of God's redemptive plan, bridging the Old Testament prophecies with New Testament eschatology.

By calling people to repentance and preparing the way for Christ's return, Elijah's reappearance highlights the continuity of God's plan for humanity—from the promises made in the Old Testament to their fulfillment in Christ's Second Coming. Elijah's role, therefore, underscores the dual nature of the end times: as a time of judgment and justice but also as a moment of hope, restoration, and the final establishment of God's eternal Kingdom.

VII. Conclusion

The concept of Elijah's return is central to Christian eschatology, particularly in its relationship to the **dual fulfillment theory**, which explains Elijah's prophetic role across two pivotal events in salvation history: the first and second comings of Christ. This theory posits that Elijah's mission is not confined to a single moment but is expressed in two key stages. The first fulfillment occurred during the life and ministry of **John the Baptist**, who, as stated by Jesus, came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" to prepare the way for Christ's first advent. The second fulfillment, however, is yet to come and is anticipated before the **Second Coming of Christ**, where a **literal Elijah** or a similar prophetic figure is expected to return to complete the work of restoration and prepare humanity for the final judgment and the establishment of God's eternal kingdom.

Elijah's Spirit in John the Baptist: First Fulfillment

In the first fulfillment of the prophecy, **John the Baptist** is presented as the forerunner of Jesus' ministry. Both Jesus and the angel Gabriel affirmed John's role as the **Elijah who was to come**, fulfilling the prophecy from **Malachi 4:5-6** in a symbolic and spiritual sense. As stated in **Matthew 11:14 (NIV)**: *"And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come."* John's mission was to

"make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17), calling people to repentance and baptizing them as a sign of spiritual renewal, thereby preparing the way for Christ's earthly ministry.

John the Baptist's ministry parallels that of Elijah, as both prophets confronted the moral decay and apostasy of their times, urging the people to return to God. However, John's fulfillment of the Elijah prophecy is often understood as **partial**, limited to the context of Christ's first coming. While John fulfilled the role of Elijah in a spiritual sense, there is still a lingering expectation of a more **literal fulfillment** in the future, particularly in connection to the Second Coming.

The Future Elijah: Second Fulfillment

The expectation of a future Elijah is drawn from Jesus' words in **Matthew 17:11 (NIV)**: *"To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things."* This statement implies that Elijah's role in God's redemptive plan is not yet complete and points to a future return, particularly before the "great and dreadful day of the Lord" as described in **Malachi 4:5-6**. Many theologians interpret this as a prophecy about the **Second Coming of Christ**, when Elijah will appear once again to prepare the world for Christ's return and the final judgment.

In this second fulfillment, Elijah is expected to play a critical role in **restoring all things**—bringing spiritual renewal, reconciliation, and preparing the people for Christ's reign. Theologians often link this future Elijah to the **two witnesses** described in **Revelation 11**, where one of these prophetic figures is believed to be Elijah, returning to testify during the end times. This literal Elijah, or a figure coming in the "spirit and power of Elijah," will finalize the work of restoration that was begun in John the Baptist's ministry but remains uncompleted.

Importance of These Prophecies for Christian Eschatology

The prophecies concerning Elijah's return are foundational for **Christian eschatology**, as they frame the expectation of Christ's Second Coming within the broader biblical narrative of prophecy, fulfillment, and restoration. The **dual fulfillment theory** underscores the importance of understanding prophecy not as a single event but as part of a larger divine plan that unfolds over time.

In Christian theology, Elijah's return is a **signpost** of the end times, indicating the imminent return of Christ and the final establishment of God's kingdom. The

anticipation of Elijah's future role keeps believers watchful and spiritually prepared, reinforcing the themes of repentance, reconciliation, and divine justice that are central to eschatology. Elijah's return is seen as a precursor to the **Day of the Lord**, reminding Christians that judgment and restoration are intertwined in God's ultimate plan for the world.

The continuing **anticipation of Elijah's role** also emphasizes the **mercy** of God, as Elijah's return represents a final opportunity for humanity to repent and turn back to God before the day of judgment. It reflects the tension between God's justice and mercy—while Elijah's return heralds the coming judgment, it also provides a chance for repentance and renewal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the **dual fulfillment theory** of Elijah's return bridges the Old and New Testaments, highlighting Elijah's prophetic mission as both fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist and awaiting completion at the Second Coming of Christ. John's ministry served as the initial fulfillment, preparing the way for Christ's first coming, but the expectation of a future return of Elijah, or a similar prophetic figure, remains central to Christian eschatological hope. Elijah's return, tied to the final events of human history, reinforces the theological themes of repentance, divine justice, and restoration, as well as the ultimate victory of Christ's kingdom.

Elijah's role, both in the past and the future, serves as a reminder that God's redemptive plan is ongoing, and His promises—whether delivered by prophets or fulfilled in Christ—will come to pass in their fullness when Christ returns to "restore all things."

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    - **Malachi 4:5-6**: "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."
    - **Matthew 11:14**: "And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come."
    - **Matthew 17:10-13**: "The disciples asked him, 'Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?' Jesus replied, 'To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.'"
    - **Luke 1:17**: "And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."
    - **Revelation 11:3-6**: "And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth. They are 'the two olive trees' and the two lampstands, and 'they stand before the Lord of the earth.' If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. They have power to shut up the heavens so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want."

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    - This book provides context for understanding the mission of figures like John the Baptist in light of Old Testament prophecies such as those concerning Elijah.

These references offer a comprehensive basis for understanding the theological implications of Elijah's role in Christian eschatology, providing scriptural evidence and scholarly interpretations that support the dual fulfillment theory and its significance in both the first and second comings of Christ.